

# COVID-19 and Surveying Work Experience

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## Introduction and background

RMIT University has a long and proud history of providing Surveying and Geospatial students with the opportunity to blend work experience with their studies. This has long been formalised within the Surveying and Geospatial programs. We have also been blessed over the last 40 years to have a strong surveying sector where students and graduates had many opportunities to find suitable employment, and strong support from industry for our programs. Prior to 2020, the RMIT Surveying and Geospatial degree programs required students to complete a minimum of 12 weeks work experience as employment after completion of coursework. This requirement was reduced to 8 weeks if undertaken during studies, in recognition of the benefit of concurrent studies and work experience. This increased the interaction between learning derived from coursework and learning derived from employment.

Providing these work experience opportunities is as important now as ever. There is now a strong focus across all RMIT University programs to offer quality and varied *Work Integrated Learning* (WIL) opportunities for all students to enhance their employability. Whereas the work experience opportunities were previously only required before graduation, RMIT now expects this WIL experience, and associated assessment tasks to be completed as part of core courses in their program.

In 2020, with the agreement of the program advisory board and the Surveyors Registration Board of Victoria, and based on updated RMIT requirements, the work experience requirements have been replaced with two *Work Integrated Learning* (WIL) courses of at least 3 weeks each (with a combined total of 6 weeks). This represents the minimum work experience that students will get during their program, however most students have many more hours of employment as they complete their degree. It also has the benefit that all students will complete their work experience before their studies finish which was not the case with the previous model.

The reduced time in the new work integrated learning courses is compensated by oversight and supervision by both employers and RMIT staff. These WIL courses emphasise the learning aspects of a workplace placement and involve all parties signing a 3-way contract between the student, employer & RMIT for an agreed work experience project (paid or unpaid internship) with the following requirements:

- A minimum of 3 weeks experience for each course (6 weeks for both courses)
- If the placement involves an unpaid internship it cannot be significantly longer than 3 weeks per course (to avoid exploitation of unpaid workers)
- the work experience placement is overseen by an RMIT academic staff member
- the student is required to provide a reflective report on the experience and learnings to demonstrate achievement of the course learning outcomes.
- The employer also provides a brief assessment (comparable to a reference).

## The impact of COVID-19 on work experience and placements

Like all sectors of work, COVID-19 restrictions and the resultant closing of workspaces has had a strong impact on RMIT placements. While we have anecdotal evidence that some surveying and

geospatial students employed as casual staff have had reduced hours or loss of employment, the impacts so far on our WIL course enrolments and placements has been minimal. During this period of transition into the new WIL courses there are only 3 students currently enrolled in these WIL courses doing placements.

However, students still under the pre-2020 work experience system who are looking for more work experience to achieve their 8 or 12 weeks, are experiencing difficulty in finding enough work experience to meet their requirements to graduate. Also, while many students have well established jobs the likely impact of COVID-19 is that job losses will increase over the coming months. If the downturn in survey and geospatial work in the private sector due to COVID-19 continues for longer than expected students will have more difficulty in finding the work experience and placements they need to meet their program requirements.

## Supporting surveying student work experience

RMIT University is always considering ways to improve the quality of work experience and WIL opportunities for all our Surveying and Geospatial Students, especially those who have had trouble finding casual employment in the early stages of their degree. As with the Surveying and Geospatial sector overall, we have learned a lot from our responses to COVID-19. New opportunities have been created for students to undertake “remote” placements away from the office with regular online meetings arranged with the industry partner. This has benefits for some employers. New “virtual” WIL project opportunities are opening up with industry partners providing a project idea and relevant data, with the student working on the project under direction of both industry partners and RMIT staff. These new ways of engaging with industry can suit students who have impediments that prevent them attending a workplace at that time.

Going forward, any opportunities for companies (or government agencies) to provide paid employment are always very welcome. This continues to be the main way that students will gain work experience. While we prefer placements that are paid, some students may be open to unpaid placements for a specific project that provides a high-quality experience opportunity (but only up to the WIL course requirements of 120 hours for each WIL course or 240 hours in total).

In terms of the type of placements or work experience, we encourage companies to consider other ways to offer meaningful work experience to students. There may be special projects that arise as we rebuild as the COVID-19 restrictions lift, that allow opportunities for students to be involved. For example, a student may help a company prepare for eplan, or incorporate new technologies into the company workflow.

In the setting of job losses due to COVID we need to be imaginative in looking for work experience opportunities. Like many sectors, we will think of new and innovative ways of creating these opportunities, arising out of our experiences this year. WIL and work experience can provide students with exciting opportunities to do very interesting projects, or community initiatives, or be involved in large government projects like those connected to the Digital Cadastre Modernisation Project.

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